

THE MIGHTY HAND OF GOD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 4, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

It seems especially fitting to call your attention to God's providence at the beginning of this new year. The providence of God, which is to say his rule of the universe, including the affairs of mankind, is accepted by millions of believers. It is also doubted by millions of others.

It is heartening to know that many of our world's most influential leaders have been and are believers in providence. For example, in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which was so crucially important in laying the foundation for our nation, the statesman Benjamin Franklin said, "All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending providence in our favor. To that kind of providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proof I see of this truth--that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall without his notice, is it possible that an empire can rise without his aid?" (*Miracle of Philadelphia*, Katherine Drinker Bowen, Little, Brown and Co, Boston, p. 126).

It was because Franklin and others of our founding fathers felt this way that we have numerous evidences of the Christian faith in the various aspects of our government. One of the more prominent ones is the stamping of the expression "In God We Trust" on our coins. Another is the provision for chaplains in the Senate, the House of Representatives, and in the various branches of military service. Still another is that the President of the United States takes his oath of office with his hand upon a Bible. We are grateful for all of these evidences that reflect our nation's faith in the existence and continuing presence of God.

The Scriptures Speak

From the beginning to the end of the Bible the scriptures clearly indicate that God guides and controls the affairs of men. Such passages as Gen. 12:1-3 would have been utterly meaningless had not God been in control of the affairs of men. This passage reads, "Now Jehovah said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great: and be thou a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse, and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

As we study the story of Joseph, we see a natural developing of the ordinary events of his life in such a way as to carry out the will of God. Only two or three times in the story do we see the hand of God directly influence the course of events. Yet, in all of this story there is the obvious fulfillment of the will of God. As Joseph is sold into Egypt by his brethren, as he rises to be governor of the land, and as he ultimately sends wagons to bring his father's household into Egypt, we see the fulfilling of God's plans. The same unfolding of God's will is seen in the story of Esther in the court of Xerxes, when her presence and courageous action saved the lives of the entire Hebrew race. The life of Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's court is another evidence of the will of God being carried out in the affairs of men.

In the New Testament one of the more striking evidences of God's influence in the life of a man is seen in the story of Saul of Tarsus. At one point in the story the Lord directs the preacher Ananias to go to Saul in these words, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16). In the following chapters we see this brilliant young Jewish lawyer yield his life to the plan of God, as he became the great apostle to the Gentiles preaching the gospel of Christ throughout the entire Roman world. As we see him stand in the courts of Roman governors, Felix and Festus, and ultimately before the Emperor Nero in Rome, as we see him as he stands in Jewish synagogues and preaches to people of his own race, and finally as we see him undergo severe persecutions of many kinds, we see the four-fold plan which God had for his life fulfilled in exact detail.

In his direction of the affairs of men there are times when God utilizes the talents, positions and powers of men who are separated from him, as in the case of King Cyrus, (Ezra 1:1-2), in order to promote the cause of righteousness. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome, "The powers that be are ordained of God." (Rom. 13:1). In the Old Testament we note that when God's people, the Israelites, had been disobedient and needed punishment, the Lord, allowed them to be taken into Babylonian captivity. The Egyptian Pharaohs and the Roman Caesars and their governors also played their parts in God's plans.

From an entirely different viewpoint, we get further evidence of God's concern for men. In Matt. 10:29-30, there are the words, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? and not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father (meaning your Father's notice); but the very hairs of your head are all numbered." This passage indicates clearly that God is concerned even about the falling of a single insignificant sparrow and further that he is even more aware of the details of our lives than we ourselves. It is further interesting to compare this story with the way that a similar story is told in Luke 12:6, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pence? and not one of

them is forgotten in the sight of God, But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” (Luke 6-7). Notice that two sparrows were sold for a penny; five sparrows for two pennies. The sparrow was of so little value that if one wanted four he had an extra one thrown in for nothing. Yet God is concerned even about sparrows

Both Creator and Sustainer

Not only did God create the universe, including our earth and all life upon it, but he continues to sustain the universe and all life within it. It is an easy matter to confuse coincidence with providence. Often a believer feels that he can see God’s hand in some event in his own life, whereas a non-believer classifies it merely as a coincidence. The fact is that we cannot prove that any one given event is absolutely and unquestionably an evidence of God’s providence. However, it is possible when all of the events of a life are taken together to see the evidence of God’s providence in that life. The whole pattern of events cannot be marked off as coincidence. In my own life, and in the lives of many others whom I have known over the years, have I been able to see a clear evidence that God is guiding and shaping the events which happen. We are reminded of the statement of James, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning.” (James 1:17)

If I could choose but one sentence from the entire Bible, as an evidence that the scriptures teach the providence of God, I believe I would choose Romans 8:28. Here the apostle Paul, after years of preaching the gospel of Christ under all kinds of circumstances, was able to say, “And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose.” This does not say that all things are good, far from it, but it does say that God superintends the affairs of our lives in such a way that all things work together for our ultimate good.

Providence is taught in Paul’s writings to the Corinthians, “And God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always all sufficiency in everything, may abound unto every good work: as it is written, He hath scattered abroad, he hath given to the poor; his righteousness abideth forever. And he that supplieth seed to the sower and bread for food, shall supply and multiply your seed for sowing, and increase the fruits of your righteousness.” (II Cor. 9:8-10). In the Old Testament book of Isaiah we find these words, “Jehovah’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.” (Is. 59:1). From the pen of Samuel come these words, “Jehovah maketh poor, and maketh rich; he bringeth low, he also lifteth up.” (I Sam. 2:7).

The noted Charles H. Spurgeon, whose preaching was so widely heard in London during the last century, had this to say, “God is every day preaching to us by similitudes. When Christ was on earth He preached in parables. Providence is God’s sermon. The things which we see about us are God’s thoughts and God’s words to us; and if we were but wise there is not a step that we can take which we should not find to be full of mighty instruction. God warns you every day by his own words; He speaks to you by the lips of His servants, His ministers; but besides this by similitudes He addresses you. He leaves no stone unturned to bring His wandering children to Himself. (*Everybody’s Sermon*).

Providence And Prayer

Providence and prayer are inseparably linked together. We believe implicitly that prayer changes things. Apart from this concept life would be frightening beyond description. There are those who doubt the existence of providence because of earth’s ills; the same doubters take for granted the innumerable blessings of life. Those lives that are regularly in touch with God through prayer show the evidence of special blessings that are unknown in those lives which are separated from God.

All men have needs which they themselves are incapable of meeting. Some of these needs can be met through the instrumentality of other men. But some can be met only by the power and providence of God. Paul wrote, “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us.” (Eph. 3:20).

If a man is a mere machine, not subject to the will, the guidance, and the protection of his Creator, prayer must be ruled out as a waste of time. But consider the record of the scriptures. Notice how different is the attitude toward prayer. On one occasion Jesus taught his disciples, “After this manner therefore Pray ye; Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen.” (Matt. 6:9-13). Not only did Christ teach his disciples to pray, he also prayed often himself, Sometimes he spent entire nights in prayer. The apostles prayed. Other of the Lord’s disciples prayed. Prayer is everywhere throughout the scriptures.

Luke’s eighteenth chapter opens with the words, “He spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray.” (Luke 18:1). Paul wrote, “pray without ceasing.” (I Thes. 5:17). James added these words, “Is any among you suffering? let him pray. Is any cheerful? let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up ... Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its workings. Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained

not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.” (James 5:13-18).

The story is told of two farmers, one an atheist and the other a believer. As the summer wore on, the believer, who rested and worshipped on the Lord’s day each week, saw that his neighbor’s crops appeared to be better than his own. The unbelieving neighbor, who worked seven days each week without stepping, also saw this and chided his Christian friend. The Christian’s answer was simply, “God does not necessarily settle his accounts in September.” There is often more to the story than is visible to human eyes, but we can depend upon the fact that God’s righteous judgment will ultimately settle all accounts.

Conclusion

G. C. Brewer, a friend of my family through the years, wrote his autobiography after he had been told that he had terminal cancer. There is one section of his book in which he says, “The surgeons ... found that which we had all feared and suspected, and, of course we all knew then that I had only a limited time in which to live ... The readers way wonder how any one reacts to a sentence such as that that has been pronounced upon me ... For myself, I am perfectly resigned and willing to say the Lord’s will be done. I have always believed and preached often that the Lord would be with us in the ‘valley of the shadow of death.’ I am fully confident that my name is written in heaven where the names of all of God’s first born children are enrolled. (Heb. 12:23). The Lord taught us to rejoice because of this fact ... It is coming to me in the seventy-second year of my life and no doubt this is the way the Lord wants it to be, and what the Lord wills, I accept. I am glad, however, that I can rely upon what I have preached and prayed all the days of my life. I have prayed for the Lord to be with me in the last hour, and I have trusted that he would do all that he promised ... I may live on for some months yet to come or the hour may pass within thirty days or less--no one can tell. But that I am fast approaching the hour of my departure is of no question at all. The Lord’s will be done! Amen.” This is a statement of full faith in the providence of God.

We close with the words of John Greenleaf Whittier:

I know not where his islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond his love and care.

It is with this faith that we confidently enter the new year.